

ECAD7003 - Learners, Schools & Communities: where am I teaching?

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Assignment title: How a school develops one aspect of its SDP: a report that critically reflects on the actions, impact and evidence base.

Introduction

A School Development Plan (SDP) is a document which outlines key priorities and actions that a school will undertake in order to improve learner outcomes, which is informed by a continuous cycle of self evaluation (Welsh Government, 2014). This essay will consider a specific action point of a school development plan, and critically reflect upon the actions taken, the impact of these actions, and evidence base that informs the next steps of the school. In line with BERA guidance, the school and any identifying information will be anonymised (BERA, 2018). The school itself is a large secondary school in Swansea, where 26% of pupils are eligible for free school meals (eFSM), which is well above the national average of 17.5% (ESTYN, 2015). It is important to note that the primary schools that feed into the secondary school have a stark socio-economic and cultural divide - for example, one feeder primary school has an eFSM rate of only 2.9% of pupils (ESTYN, 2022a), compared to another feeder primary school having 55% eFSM pupils (ESTYN, 2016). The school has identified an attainment and learning gap between these learners, and this forms a large aspect of the school development plan.

Literature Review

In the context of the new Curriculum for Wales (2021), guidance from the Welsh Government (2022a, 2022b, 2022c) has been issued to ensure that school development plans (SDPs) are meaningful tools that evaluate learner progression and wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2022a). For all successful SDPs, this begins with a robust, rigorous and evidence based self evaluation that identifies the strengths of schools, as well as areas for improvement (Welsh Government, 2022b). Areas of self evaluation should include the three national priorities: vision and leadership; curriculum, learning and teaching; and well-being, equity and inclusion (ibid). A SDP should not only evaluate learner outcomes and progress, but also the professional learning and wellbeing of all staff (Chapman and Sammons, 2013) to ensure that each staff member can provide effective teaching and learning.

Previously, self evaluation had been considered as an accountability exercise is to be completed before an inspection (Macbeath, 1999). This approach often saw an overreliance on traditional data such as qualifications, which led to the development of strategies that did not support all learners, or accurately capture the holistic development of a school (Welsh Government, 2022a). To address this, The Welsh Government issued guidance (2022a; 2022b) to support a shift towards understanding self evaluation as a valuable tool to support the progression of pupils, rather than a tool for accountability (Macbeath, 1999; Goldstone, 2022). As part of this shift towards valuing self evaluation as a tool for true development, it is important for schools to acknowledge that not all aspects of the school can be evaluated using quantifiable data, and qualitative data can be much more reflective of the school as a whole (Welsh Government, 2022c). By promoting the use of qualitative data, this supported schools to move away from treating self evaluation and school development plans as an accountability exercise based upon the exam results of the school. However, Goldstone (2022) recognised that to support this culture shift, schools and staff may need additional training in collecting, analysing and using a diverse range of data, which includes but is not limited to qualifications, achievement scores, learner and

parental feedback, observations and the everyday reflective practices of teaching. A robust self evaluation should also include all staff, learners and stakeholders, such as governors, parents, and community links (ESTYN, 2022b) to ensure that all voices are heard and have a say in the development of the school.

Once a robust self evaluation has been completed, strategic planning then takes place to identify action points to address areas of development (Welsh Government, 2014). This step may again include involving stakeholders, such as governors, the local authority, other schools in the area, and the regional consortia (Welsh Government, 2022a). This allows schools to take a wide approach to collaboration to hear various perspectives on how to improve pupil progress. Stakeholders can become “critical friends” (Brighouse and Woods, 1999: 107) who ask questions, speculate, and support the school by offering new and fresh perspectives on a variety of issues. ESTYN (2022b) recommends that the organisation of staff and stakeholders is split into specific teams, which allows for in depth planning and evaluation of strategies. Findings should then be collaboratively shared in open staff forums, where all stakeholders can contribute and build on ideas and strategies, and be critical friends to one another to support development. After strategic planning and consultation, schools may implement specific strategies and actions based upon this phase, and begin the cycle of continuous self evaluation to judge the effectiveness of these actions (Welsh Government, 2014).

When considering the SDP of the chosen placement school, one of the emerging priorities was to further improve standards in progress in learning and skills. Within this priority, the school identifies an action point to reduce the attainment gap for pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM), who are displaying a learning deficit as a result of deprivation, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. According to the Education Policy Institute (2019), in Wales, there is a disadvantage gap of 22-23 months of educational progress between eFSM learners and non FSM learners; for those experiencing persistent disadvantage, this rises to a gap of 29 months (ibid). The Education Minister for Wales has also identified that the disruption caused by the COVID-19 has only widened the gap between learners between eFSM and non FSM (Welsh Government, 2022d), and government policy such as the Pupil Deprivation Grant (2015) has been put in place to provide financial aid to schools in supporting the progression of these pupils. When considering this disadvantage gap, it is important to recognise that the binary status of ‘eFSM’ or ‘non FSM’ is being used as a proxy for economic disadvantage (Taylor, 2018). When considering eFSM/non eFSM groupings, they are often treated as binary, heterogeneous groups (Halse and Ledger, 2007). In reality, large numbers of non FSM learners may still be living in poverty, or experiencing other socio-economic factors which affect their progression in school (Taylor, 2018). Furthermore, Hobbs and Vignoles (2010) highlight that while eFSM children were more likely to be in low-income households than non-FSM children, between 50-75% of eFSM children were not in the lowest income households. This highlights that the categorisation of eFSM students is itself an imperfect tool to measure economic disadvantage, so caution must be taken when grouping students as such. Therefore, when implementing provision that is only targeted towards eFSM students, it is important to note that many other non eFSM learners would also benefit from a targeted provision; I will return to this point in the Reflection section of this assignment.

Developing an Action Point

To develop the action point of reducing the attainment gap for eFSM learners, the school completed a robust self evaluation. This action point in particular arose by evaluating the Capped 9 scores of eFSM pupils and non FSM pupils; the school found a trend which showed that a significant number of eFSM pupils leaving school were not achieving Capped 9 scores of above 365, whereas non FSM pupils were consistently achieving scores above this (Headteacher X, 2023). This quantitative data focused on evaluating the progress of KS4 pupils who had achieved their GCSEs. A limitation of this is that it excluded the evaluation of progress data for KS3 pupils - the impact of this will be further discussed in the Reflection section of this assignment. It is also important to note that this action point was derived largely from quantitative exam data; this can be problematic as an overreliance on traditional data in isolation can exclude nuance, and cause schools to focus on increasing data scores solely for accountability purposes (Welsh Government, 2022c). In this instance, Headteacher X (2023) stated that while there was a focus to improve data scores, the action point was underpinned by a desire to ensure all eFSM pupils felt supported in school to achieve their potential. Furthermore, using Goldstone's (2022) guidance, the school used qualitative judgements, learning walks, and parental and pupil questionnaires to get a wider picture of the progress of eFSM pupils. From evaluation of quantitative and qualitative data, the school surmised that eFSM pupils were less likely to be resilient learners, and were considered to be less aspirational than non FSM pupils, and as a result were less likely to match the attainment levels of non FSM learners (Headteacher X, 2023).

After self evaluation, a team of staff and governors was set up to strategically plan for how to reduce this attainment and aspiration gap within the school. Strategic planning for the school followed Welsh Government guidance (2022a), using this team to conduct research into how to target eFSM pupils and increase their attainment. One aspect of their research included forming partnerships with other schools in the local authority to gain further critical perspectives on how to tackle this issue (Headteacher X, 2023). Swaffield and MacBeath (2005) note that critical perspectives are most effective when they emerge from voluntary and mutual relationships - by partnering with other schools, this allowed for the school to gain impartial and effective feedback, and an understanding of how other contexts targeted eFSM pupils in a way that was mutually beneficial for both schools. The school set aside £10,000 to achieve this action point; much of this funding was in place to provide cover for teachers on the team, who would spend time off-timetable for their professional development and research into this area (Headteacher X, 2023). Consideration was taken to ensure that time spent off timetable did not negatively affect the progress of learners in the school due to staff absence - the need for high quality professional learning and research was balanced against the potential impact on learning (Headteacher X, 2023; Welsh Government, 2022a). The strategic planning involved identifying key literature that provided a grounding for the actions the school would implement (Headteacher X, 2023). For example, the school identified Rothon et al's (2011) study and Smith et al's (2014) work which found that students with higher academic aspirations were more than twice as likely to succeed in their GCSEs than those who did not, and that social-psychological factors such as disadvantage, self esteem, family influence, and geographical area all influence the aspiration and thus attainment of learners. This research guided the school to the Raising Attainment for Disadvantaged Youth (RADY) project (Edsential, 2020). The RADY

project was a pilot scheme for schools in Wirral which sought to tackle the inequity in schools by increasing attainment through aspiration (ibid), and the approach has since been rolled out to select schools in Wales (Welsh Government, 2020a).

Using the RADY Project, the school decided on a number of actions to implement, using an 'equity approach' to teaching and learning. This involved calculating the average target grades for eFSM and non eFSM learners, and raising the target grades (or Global Grades) for all eFSM learners to match the average target grades between the two groups, creating aspirational target grades (Edsential, 2020; Headteacher X, 2023). This equitable, target setting approach meant that eFSM learners were put in higher sets, and they were put on the same aspirational path as their non-disadvantaged peers (Edsential, 2020). This aimed to increase the aspiration of eFSM learners, and change narratives of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1985) where disadvantaged children did not believe they could succeed, so did not aspire to. Other equity actions included phone calls home to eFSM parents about their child's progress and how to support their child's learning (Headteacher X, 2023), promoting positive family engagement (Welsh Government, 2015) which aimed to increase the support around the learner. Furthermore, whole year assemblies on aspiration and resilience were given to create a 'can-do' culture within the school, and specific, individualised areas for development were identified for pupils on an individual teacher level (Headteacher X, 2023).

The goal of reducing the attainment gap is set to be reevaluated on 21/07/23, however, the impact and success of these equity actions is measured regularly by individual teachers (Headteacher X, 2023) as they work towards being a reflective practitioner (Welsh Government, 2020b). This includes the daily evaluation of learners' progress through assessment for learning strategies (Black and Wiliam, 1998), and termly data analysis to compare eFSM and non FSM pupils. Following Welsh Government guidance (2022a), the SDP is held on a live tracker, which all staff involved can add to at any time, which refreshes in real time. This allows for all stakeholders involved in the SDP to be able to see the real time progress of all action points in order to measure the impact. Qualitative surveys have also been sent to parents and pupils who are in receipt of the RADY project provision to evaluate their perceptions of the project (Headteacher X, 2023). While measuring and evaluating the impact of the RADY Project is ongoing, as this specific action point focuses on increasing the Capped 9 scores of learners; therefore, the main evaluation will be completed once exam qualification results are achieved, in order to determine whether or not the school has achieved their goal of all pupils achieving above a score of 365.

Reflection:

It is clear that the school has identified a specific goal to reduce the attainment gap between eFSM and non FSM pupils, and that specific actions are being implemented to achieve this goal, supported through a culture of ongoing and transparent self evaluation. As previously mentioned, the binary nature of eFSM versus non FSM (Halse and Ledger, 2007) may mean that a number of non FSM students who are economically and socially disadvantaged, who would benefit from the RADY Project actions, are not receiving the support that eFSM pupils would be. To address this, the school could adopt a more

personalised approach where specific students are identified depending on their eFSM status, economic status, and attitudes towards learning. As discussed, the main focus of this action point is to increase the Capped 9 scores of pupils, and there seems to be less focus on improving the progress of KS3 learners. The Education Endowment Foundation (2018) suggests that the attainment gap grows wider each stage of education, highlighting that early intervention to reduce this gap is paramount. As part of the action point, the school could take steps to collaborate with feeder primary schools to share RADY Project interventions and provide professional development for primary schools to support eFSM pupils in their transition to secondary school.

As discussed previously, the action point focuses on reducing the attainment gap by analysing the quantitative data of Capped 9 scores, and the main evaluation will be formed from the KS4 quantitative GCSE results. To ensure that intervention and provision given to pupils in KS3 is effective, and early RADY interventions are succeeding, this might require the school to complete further self evaluation of pupil progress in KS3. This could be done by measuring the impact of RADY interventions at different points within KS3 throughout the year. By focusing on the evaluation of early interventions, this may help to identify any areas for development which could be addressed before students reach KS4, and ensure that the school is not narrowly focusing on quantitative GCSE results, but taking a more holistic approach to progress and development.

Furthermore, the RADY Project focuses on the aspirations of eFSM learners in order to improve their attainment. However, it is important to note that the phrase 'aspiration' is laden with socio-cultural ideals, and this term may mean different things to various diverse groups. Spohrer (2016) highlights that the word aspiration is often connected with white, middle-class ideas of success that are not always aligned with what the learners themselves consider success. Furthermore, St Clair and Benjamin (2011) suggest that schools can limit students by prescribing specific aspirations for students through supporting only one aspect of their education, thus restricting their ability to succeed in other areas. To avoid prescribing specific ideals of aspiration onto pupils who may have different perceptions of what success looks like, the school may wish to consider further professional development to support staff in understanding aspiration as a socio-cultural construct (Taylor, 2018).

Conclusion

Through engaging with relevant literature and guidance, and collaborating with my placement school, I now have a deeper understanding of school development plans, and how specific action points are identified, implemented and evaluated. Through considering the attainment gap between eFSM pupils and non FSM pupils, I feel able to support eFSM pupils in my own practice by using aspirational targets and working individually with the student to promote resilience, and to understand their own goals in order to help the student achieve these. I recognise the importance of a reflective and evaluative culture within schools in order to improve learner outcomes, but also to improve my own reflective teaching practice.

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